

ELECTION 2004: THE LATINO AND ASIAN VOTE

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As election 2004 approaches, impact at the voting booth of the nation's two largest immigrant-dominated populations—Latinos and Asians—is increasing. But, Urban Institute analysis underscores that voting levels among Latinos and Asians lag well behind the groups' population growth, largely because many new immigrants are not yet citizens and their children are still too young to vote. As a result, the full political force of ongoing demographic change will be felt over decades, not years.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- **Latino and Asian vote is rising.** While the number of votes cast by whites in the presidential election rose by only 4.3 percent between 1996 and 2000,¹ the number of Asian votes rose by 22 percent. Hispanic votes increased by 19 percent.

The Asian and Latino populations are heavily dominated by immigrants: 64 percent of Asians are foreign-born as are 40 percent of Latinos. In contrast, only 3 percent of whites are immigrants.

- **Latino and Asian vote is not proportional to population.** Latinos represented 12.6 percent of the total U.S. population in 2000, but only 5.3 percent of the votes cast. Asians were 4.2 percent of the population versus 1.9 percent of votes. In contrast, whites accounted for 70 percent of the population, but over 81 percent of all votes.

In 2004, the Latino share of votes could increase to 6.1 percent solely because of population growth (i.e., with no changes in registration or turnout). For Asians, population growth could increase their share to 2.4 percent.

- **Demographic factors dilute Latino and Asian vote.** About 62 percent of Latinos could not register to vote in 2000 because they were either too young or not U.S. citizens; 59 percent of Asians could not register. In contrast, only 35 percent of blacks and 25 percent of whites could not register to vote for demographic reasons.

POLITICAL FACTORS

- **Naturalization remains a key factor.** Legal Latino immigrants are much *less likely* to become U.S. citizens than other immigrants; only 38 percent had done so by 2000 versus almost 60 percent of other immigrants. If Latinos had naturalized at the same rate as other immigrants, approximately 700,000 additional Latino votes would have been cast in 2000. Another one million Latino votes could be added in 2004, if the naturalization rate were on par with other immigrants.

¹ Throughout, all racial designations refer only to non-Hispanics.

- **Voter registration lags at every age.** Latino and Asian citizens are considerably less likely to register to vote than whites and blacks, at every age. If Latinos had registered at the same rate as white citizens, the result would have been approximately one million more Latino votes cast in 2000. Asians would have 500,000 additional voters if they had registered at the same rate as white citizens.
- **Lower turnout also translates into loss of potential votes.** Latino citizens who register are less likely to vote than whites. If Latinos had turned out to vote at the same rate as white citizens, the result would have been almost 700,000 more Latino votes cast in 2000. Asian turnout levels are higher, but turnout as high as whites would still have added about 200,000 new Asian voters.
- **Targeting implications:** For Hispanics, large and roughly equal payoffs can be expected from expanding naturalization, increasing voter registration, and increasing turnout. For Asians, the main strategic opportunity to increase their presence in the electorate is increasing relatively low registration levels.

FUTURE TRENDS

- **Geographic distribution of Latino and Asian voters will play a role in 2004.** Latinos account for about 7.8 percent of potential voters nationwide, but more than 5 percent of potential voters in only 15 states.² The most heavily Hispanic state, New Mexico (40 percent) was extraordinarily close in 2000. In Texas (25 percent) and California (19 percent), Latinos are unlikely to make a difference since Bush and Kerry, respectively, are prohibitive favorites. However, in potential swing states, such as Ohio or Wisconsin, even the 1–2 percent of potential voters who are Latino could play a critical role.

Asians are an even smaller share of potential voters—3.1 percent. Asians are two-thirds of the electorate in Hawaii, but are more than 5 percent only in California (11 percent), Nevada (6 percent), and Washington (5 percent).

- **Latino and Asian voters will play a much larger role in future elections.** Both Latino and Asian populations are projected to grow rapidly in the future, reaching about 25 percent and 10 percent of the population, respectively, in 2050. The aging of these groups and the increasing share of natives among them will strengthen the presence of Latinos and Asians in the pool of potential voters. Currently, only 40 percent of each group is eligible to vote. By about 2025, about 50 percent of each will be eligible to vote. This date could be speeded up through increased rates of naturalization.

Methodological note: The data on registration and voting come from the November 2000 Current Population Survey (CPS). These data identify naturalized citizens but do not make the distinctions among non-citizens as legal permanent, legal temporary, and unauthorized residents necessary to compute naturalization rates and other figures used in this brief. Naturalization rates and the like are obtained using techniques developed by the Urban Institute to assign legal status to foreign-born individuals in the March Supplements to the CPS. Data from the March 2000 and November 2000 CPS are then combined to compute turnout, participation, and naturalization rates.

² Based on 2003 data.